

The Flower of Persia: Botanical Language in Aeschylus' *Persians*

Previous scholarship has shown that Aeschylus frequently uses botanical language in the *Persians* (Broadhead 1960, Hall 1996, Garvie 2009), and that this language could be linked to an archaic doctrine of *ὑβρις* about the consequences of wanton growth (Michelini 1978). As Michelini explains, because of too much nourishment (*κόρος*), a wanton (*ὑβρίζων*) plant unproductively expends all its growth on foliage rather than fruit, and is therefore *ἄκαρπος*—contributing no fruit in return for the cultivation received. Such a plant must be pruned (*κολούειν*) so that it can renew its production of fruit. Furthermore, Peradotto argues that Aeschylus utilizes botanical language to create a tapestry of motifs, images, verbal echoes, and metaphors to evince the moral state of the cosmos (Peradotto 1964). Of the eighteen botanical terms occurring in the *Persians*, Aeschylus favors the blossoming and swelling connotation evoked by the repetition of the word *ἄνθος*—a term shown to be polysemous (Clarke 2005). I argue that blossom (*ἄνθος*) is a leitmotif that connects the ruin of Xerxes with specific acts of *ὑβρις* (as demarcated by similar botanical terms throughout the play) committed against land and sea, and that this floral leitmotif culminates and even manifests itself etymologically (v.i. *ἐξανθοῦσα*) toward the play's conclusion when Darius says, “Hubris which has blossomed produces the husk of ruin for which reason it reaps a most lamentable crop” (*ὑβρις γὰρ ἐξανθοῦσ' ἐκάρπωσε στάχυν / ἄτης, ὅθεν πάγκλαντον ἐξαμᾶι θέρος*, *Pers.* 821-822). I show how Aeschylus prepares the audience to expect this proverb about *ὑβρις* with four occurrences of the *ἄνθος* leitmotif that correlate with four botanical categories metaphorically present within the text. Moreover, the *ἄνθος* leitmotif not only subordinates other botanical terms but also describes and accounts for a narrative pattern that progresses from apparent fecundity to realized infecundity through mowing and reaping.

These four stages of the narrative pattern depict the wanton growth of Xerxes' Persian force (*ύβρίζειν*), the pruning of wanton growth (*κολούειν*), the harvest of woes (*θερίζειν*), and the consequential fruitlessness resulting from wanton growth (*άκαρπεῖν*). The *ύβρίζειν* stage begins with the *parados*, where the senescent chorus of Persians anxiously recollects the mightiness of the host of Persia as “the blossom of Persian land” (*άνθος Περσίδος αἶας*, *Pers.* 59). Shortly following the *parados*, the *κολούειν* stage begins when the messenger exclaims his shock and horror at the singular destruction of the Persian force as “the fallen blossom of Persians is dead” (*τὸ Περσῶν δ' άνθος οἶχεται πεσόν*, *Pers.* 252). Bookending the messenger speech, the *θερίζειν* stage begins with the second entrance of the Queen—thematically marked by “blossoms. . .offspring of the earth” (*άνθη . . . γαίας τέκνα*, *Pers.* 618)—and extends to the end of Darius' speech. Finally, the *άκαρπεῖν* stage begins with the advent of Xerxes where the chorus recalls its original opening metaphor by apposition, “many men, the blossom of [Persian] country” (*πολλοὶ φῶτες, χώρας άνθος*, *Pers.* 925).

Because of the extraordinary defeat suffered by the Persians at Salamis, the *άνθος* leitmotif is elegantly appropriate as an image of nature, since Aeschylus describes the battle as if nature itself fights as an “ally of the Athenians” (*γῆ ζύμμαχος*, *Pers.* 792): “the island crags return the echo” of the Athenian battle hymn and “frighten the Persians” (*Pers.* 387-391); nature becomes a weapon when the Persians “are struck with stones” (*πέτροισιν ήράσσοντο*, *Pers.* 460); and, finally, nature requites Xerxes for yoking the stream of the Hellespont when the remnant Persian force attempts to cross the “ice” (*κρυσταλλοπήγα*) of the Strymon river, but the sun melts the ice with its “rays” (*αύγαῖς*, *Pers.* 504). Such scenes depicting nature fighting against the Persians are connected to the botanical proverb for *ύβρις* by other botanical terms subordinate to the *άνθος* leitmotif to show that Persia's defeat became possible through the action of one man,

and that catastrophic defeat was inevitable according to the divine law of *ὑβρις* inherent to nature.

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